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Satisfaction with the Quality of University Education in Psychology in Wartime Ukraine: Group Comparison Between University Students and Graduated Psychologists

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Abstract: ***Objective.*** *This paper aimed at revealing the most vulnerable or weak points in the quality of university education in psychology in wartime Ukraine that should be timely and appropriately addressed to enhance mental health care services provided by psychologists.* ***Methods.*** *This research focused on comparing the levels of satisfaction with Ukraine-based university education in psychology between university students studying in wartime (n=418) and earlier graduated professional psychologists (n=327) using the purposely developed 7-point Likert scale. The online survey included a questionnaire on sociodemographic characteristics and satisfaction with university education specified on different topics: theoretical knowledge, skills in practice and research, ethical issues, evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP), etc.* ***Results*** *showed that university students evaluate the items of quality of their university education in general more satisfactorily (Me=4–6; in range 1-7), compared to practicing professionals (Me=2–5, in range 1-7). However, both groups assessed their knowledge regarding the EBPP, practical skills, and appropriate advertisement of psychological services as the points of education with the lowest quality. Interestingly, among the most significant differences between groups was the satisfaction with knowledge of legal requirements for practice (Welch's t=9.005, p<.001), which the practicing psychologists assessed considerably lower than students.* ***Conclusion.*** *In addition to ongoing efforts to adjust the university education in psychology to the circumstances of war, further steps should include changes in curricula and education format to 1) clarify the EBPP approach, 2) focus on practical skills development, and 3) offer an appropriate framework of psychological services advertisement.*

Keywords: *evidence-based practice in psychology; higher education; satisfaction; psychology; Ukraine; university education.*

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Introduction

Since 2014 Ukrainians have been forced to defend their lands from the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, which escalated to a full-scale Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 throughout the country. These two sequent invasions with ongoing military aggression required timely, appropriate, and sufficient response from the mental health care system, including psychological assessment, support, and evidence-based interventions (Nelin, 2025). This goal also required an essential focus on assessing and enhancing the quality of psychology education in Ukraine amidst the war, both within and beyond universities.

In response to the war, universities throughout Ukraine had to implement numerous changes in the educational process (Shlenova et al., 2024). Foremost, the safety of students and academic staff was defined as the top priority of the Ukrainian higher-education system during wartime (Zayachuk, 2024). Up to 37% of the surveyed Ukrainian scholars reported they became internal or external migrants (Tsybuliak et al., 2024), maintaining or suspending work at Ukraine-based institutions (Fiialka, 2022). Many universities had to change their location, leaving the cities and small towns near the frontline (Kozmenko et al., 2023; Orzhel et al., 2023). A range of universities also changed their schedules due to energy issues and worked in the summer because of the difficulties in heating provision (Makhovych, 2024). For safety reasons, many faculties had to shift to solely online education, which resulted in higher anxiety in students compared to those who continued education in person in a blended form (Cherepiekhina et al., 2023). Generally, unlike during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Viznyuk et al., 2022), remote education in wartime often could hardly overcome the low accessibility to continue education because of the issues with electricity and internet connection accompanying the air raid alerts, which interrupted the classes (Galynska & Bilous, 2022).

No less important are the mental health conditions of university students affected by war. Already in May 2022, researchers reported the prevalence of deteriorated mental conditions among students and academic staff up to 97.8%, which included high levels of depression, exhaustion, anger, and loneliness; more severe in students and females (Kurapov et al., 2023). Having repeated this research in November 2022, the scholars noted no positive changes observed in the sample (Kurapov et al., 2024). Data collected in September-November 2023 demonstrated that 91.1% of the surveyed university students had at least one traumatic experience during the war, 66.4% had alcohol consumption and 11.5% used other substances,

which was associated with older age, multiple relocations, suspended education, and a number of trauma exposures (Myshakivska et al., 2024). As a result, focusing on the distressed psychological states of all parties in the educational process (i.e., administration, academic staff, and students) and dealing with organizational issues caused by military aggression created serious obstacles in ensuring the quality of education (Zayachuk, 2024).

The abovementioned war-related issues also compounded the gaps in university education in psychology that were observed before 2022. For instance, previous research reported a low prevalence of utilizing evidence-based interventions among Ukrainian psychologists (Hook et al., 2021), inconsistency in knowledge and practical implementation of professional ethics (Palii, 2023), and poor understanding of legal requirements for conducting psychological practice (Palii et al., 2024).

Therefore, this paper focuses on revealing the most vulnerable and reliable points in the current quality of university education in psychology in wartime Ukraine extracted from the experience of students studying after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to previously graduated psychologists.

Methodology

Research design

This study was designed following the methodology of "The Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology" — STROBE checklist for cohort studies (Von Elm et al., 2007) to compare two independent groups of respondents. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. How are Ukraine-based university students who study psychology in wartime satisfied with the quality of their university education?

2. How are earlier graduated Ukrainian psychologists satisfied with the quality of their university education?

3. Is there any difference in satisfaction with the quality of Ukraine-based university education in psychology between those who are studying in wartime and those who graduated earlier?

Participants

Two groups of respondents were recruited to participate in this study voluntarily and anonymously. The first group consisted of Ukraine-based university students who were studying psychology as their profession. The second group encompassed graduated Ukrainian psychologists. The

invitation to participate was disseminated among 1094 potential respondents. Among them, 793 participants provided full responses to the survey, but only 745 confirmed that they were currently studying at or graduated from Ukraine-based universities. Other respondents informed that they were studying abroad. Their responses were excluded from further data analysis.

Survey development

Considering wartime, a survey was conducted online to involve participants from different locations. A questionnaire included sociodemographic specifics and eight items of satisfaction with the quality of university education to be assessed by the respondents using the 7-point Likert scale: theoretical knowledge, skills in diagnostics, practical skills, research skills, understanding evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP) approach, professional ethics, legal requirements to conduct psychological practice in Ukraine and standards of its appropriate advertisement.

Procedure

The data collection lasted from December 14, 2023, till March 7, 2024, on the SurveyMonkey platform. Participants of the two groups were recruited in different ways. University students received the invitation to participate through their local psychology departments and faculties, which agreed to assist us in gathering data for this research. Graduated psychologists were involved through the announcements within their professional associations and via social media platforms.

Ethical approval

This study followed the ethical requirements for research involving living beings described in the Helsinki Declaration. The research project was assessed and approved by the Ethics Commission of the Ukraine Sigmund Freud University.

Data analysis

Data analysis integrated descriptive statistics, chi-square test (χ^2) and Welch's t-test for data comparison between two independent groups.

Results

Participants

418 university students and 327 graduated psychologists, mostly females located in Ukraine, provided complete responses to our survey. Full sociodemographic description of the samples is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the samples
(Table designed by the authors)

	N (%)		χ^2
Characteristic	Students	Practitioners	
Gender			
Male	55 (13.2)	25 (7.6)	5.82*
Female	363 (86.8)	302 (92.4)	
Current residence			
In Ukraine	386 (92.3)	271 (82.9)	15.8***
Abroad	32 (7.7)	56 (17.1)	
Academic degrees in Psychology (multiple choice)			
None	376 (90)	0 (0)	594***
Bachelor	32 (7.7)	97 (29.7)	62.1***
Master	13 9 (3.1)	243 (74.3)	412***
Doctoral Degree	0 (0)	35 (10.7)	46.9***
	***M** (SD, SE) / **Me** (min-max)*		*Welch`s t*
	Students	Practitioners	
Age	**32.8** (12.1, .591) / **33** (18-64)	**37.9** (9.27, .513) / **37** (21-67)	-6.47***
Number of graduated universities	**1.11** (.388, .019) / **1** (1-5)	**1.46** (.824, .046) / **1** (1-5)	-7.17***

Note. * – p<.05, ** – p<.01, *** – p<.001

Satisfaction with the quality of university education

As this variable was measured using the 7-point Likert scale (in range 1-7), we analyzed the levels of satisfaction with the quality of university education both within groups and between groups (see Table 3).

Table 2. Respondents' satisfaction with the quality of their university education in psychology
(Table designed by the authors)

Variable	Students (n=418)				Psychologists (n=327)				Welch's t
	M_1	SD_1	Me_1	SE_1	M_2	SD_2	Me_2	SE_2	
Theoretical knowledge	5.25	1.44	5	.071	5.01	1.52	5	.084	2.202*
Diagnostics skills	4.81	1.58	5	.78	4.72	1.63	5	.09	0.823
Practical skills	4.39	1.81	4	.088	3.75	1.73	4	.095	4.886***
Research skills	4.82	1.58	5	.077	4.62	1.69	5	.093	1.621
EBPP approach	4.51	1.67	4	.082	3.98	1.68	4	.093	4.269***
Legal requirements	4.7	1.77	5	.086	3.48	1.87	3	.104	9.005***
Advertisement	3.92	1.97	4	.096	2.48	1.65	2	.092	10.811***
Ethics	5.55	1.5	6	.074	5.06	1.72	5	.095	4.125***
In total	37.95	11.11	38	.54	33.11	10.69	33	.591	6.033***

Note. * – p<.05, ** – p<.01, *** – p<.001

Following table 3, both groups were most satisfied with how they were educated with the professional ethics (M_{1-2}=5.55–5.06, Me_{1-2}=5-6) and theory of psychological science (M_{1-2}=5.01-5.25, Me_{1-2}=5) and most dissatisfied with appropriate standards for advertisement of psychological services (M_{1-2}=2.48-3.92, Me_{1-2}=2-4), practical skills (M_{1-2}=3.75-4.39, Me_{1-2}=4) and understanding EBPP approach (M_{1-2}=3.98-4.51, Me_{1-2}=4). Generally, the surveyed graduated psychologists were significantly more dissatisfied with their university education compared to students (p<.001), except for three variables: diagnostics, research skills, and theoretical knowledge. Interestingly, the knowledge of legal requirements of psychological practice (Welch's t=9.005, p<.001) and of appropriate standards for the advertisement of psychological services (Welch's t=10.811, p<.001) had the largest difference between groups.

Discussion

This research aimed to reveal the current quality of university education in psychology in Ukraine amidst the war based on the experience of students studying after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to psychologists who graduated in previous periods. As the chosen methodology followed the STROBE checklist for the cohort studies (Von Elm et al., 2007), students and practicing professionals throughout Ukraine were invited to participate anonymously in the online survey.

The obtained results showed that, unlike the practicing professionals, the surveyed university students generally evaluated the majority of the proposed eight items of quality of their university education as more satisfactory. This result could be commented on at least in two ways. First, the higher scores of the evaluated quality of university education among those who study in wartime may reflect the positive contribution of the recent national and international efforts to enhance mental health professionals training in Ukraine (Velykodna et al., 2023), in particular by adjusting the educational goals and processes to the circumstances of martial law and war-related life threats (Zayachuk, 2024). However, previous research suggests that psychology students' satisfaction with university education is often much predicted by factors, that are not directly associated with curricula content or its relevance to practice, e.g., by students' self-efficacy and institutional reputation (Stanyer et al., 2024). Overall, previous studies noticed that students' satisfaction with a university education in a specific field means neither that they will work in this field, nor their satisfaction with professional career development (Urea, 2019). Instead, our result could also be seen as showing a gap between what students consider as good preparedness for practice and what graduated psychologists face after transitioning to practice (Sagberg, 2014).

However, both groups assessed their knowledge regarding the EBPP, practical skills, and appropriate advertisement of psychological services as the points of education with the lowest quality. The finding regarding the EBPP is consistent with previous studies on the lack of knowledge and low prevalence of utilization of EBPP among Ukrainian mental health professionals, including psychologists (Hook et al., 2021; Lazos et al, 2024). Therefore, this topic should be in a specific focus on further improvements of the Ukrainian educational system in order to strengthen the capacities of the mental health care system in wartime (Vus et al., 2024).

The quality of the obtained practical skills was assessed as rather neutral by both groups. Foremost, it may reflect the lack of so-called "learning by doing", which is crucial both for satisfaction with learning and for a smooth transition to practice (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019), which worsened in times of pandemic and war in Ukraine (Cherepiekhina et al., 2023).

Research shows that psychologists' transition to practice much depends on efficient supervisory support of practicing (O'Connell et al., 2022), which is also an essential part of EBPP (Lazos et al., 2024). However, in Ukraine, the beginning of psychological practice under supervision was recently established as mandatory to be implemented soon (Palii et al., 2024). As obtaining sufficient knowledge and practical skills significantly contributes to professional confidence (Velykodna et al., 2023), it is important to seek new ways of providing students with practical skills in evidence-based interventions under systematic supervision.

Interestingly, among the most significant differences between groups was the satisfaction with knowledge of legal requirements for practice, which the practicing psychologists assessed considerably lower than students. We associate this result with the ongoing process of clarifying the requirements and limitations of psychologists' competencies and responsibilities in Ukraine, in which those, who studied earlier, know less than current students (Palii et al., 2024). Recent laws and orders on the mental health care system in general and on psychologists' training and practice – both established and being currently developed – nowadays are discussed intensively within psychological societies. However, many of them are postponed in implementation to the next several years. Therefore, professionals would have time to overcome the gaps in knowledge, skills, or other requirements for practice they lack.

Finally, both groups were most satisfied with how they were educated with professional ethics and the theory of psychological science. This result seems paradoxical as ethical issues and the problem of uncertainty have been reported as the most vulnerable in practicing psychologists since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Palii, 2023; Velykodna et al., 2024). However, as this study was conducted in December 2023, our findings could be interpreted as a sign either of psychologists' denial of this ongoing problem (Palii et al., 2024), including reflected in not knowing the rules for self-advertisement, revealed in this study, or of the fact that by the end of the second year of the full-scale war in Ukraine, professionals indeed improved their understanding of ethical framework relevant to practice in wartime.

Further research would benefit from evaluating the association between students' satisfaction with the quality of the university education in psychology and their likeliness to transition to psychological practice as their main profession.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the chosen research design evaluated the respondents' perception of the quality of their education instead of an external, objective assessment of their skills and knowledge. Satisfaction with the quality of education could be mediated by other means such as faculty engagement (Lengetti et al., 2021) or students' self-efficacy (Stanyer et al., 2024). Second, unequal gender distribution within and between the samples, although reflects the situation in the mental health care working force (Velykodna et al., 2023), limits the possibility to extrapolate the obtained results to male students and practicing psychologists.

Conclusions

Following the key findings of this study, the authors suggest that in addition to ongoing efforts to adjust the university education in psychology to the circumstances of war, further steps should include changes in curricula and education format to 1) clarify and implement the EBPP approach, including continuous learning and ongoing supervision, 2) focus on practical skills development tailored to the changing specifics of requests from the population, and 3) offer an appropriate framework of psychological services advertisement based on ethics.

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Conflict of interest | *The authors declare no conflict of interest.*

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *No AI tools were utilised for preparing this paper.*

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